DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 359 954 IR 054 449

AUTHOR Wortley, Beatrice
TITLE Literature and Literacy: The 'Real' Book Approach to Children Learning To Read.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarians (21st, Belfast, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom, July 20-24, 1992).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; Preschool Education; Psycholinguistics; *Reading Instruction; Reading Material Selection; *Reading Programs; Reading Teachers; *Whole Language Approach
IDENTIFIERS Goodman (Kenneth); United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This article traces the development in Britain of the 'real' book approach to children learning to read. It begins with reference to Kenneth Goodman's seminal work in psycholinguistics published in the late 1960s. It goes on to draw on the work of Margaret Meek at the London Institute of Education and Liz Waterland, a teacher in an English primary school. Margaret Meek, the acknowledged doyenne of reading teachers, demonstrates the use and the place of quality fiction for children learning to read. While Margaret Meek concentrates on the value of quality children's literature, Liz Waterland writes from the point of view of the classroom teacher. She describes how adopting the 'real' book approach was a 'Damascus Road' conversion for her and one she could never go back on. An article by Colin Mills is discussed for the way it points out how the common language of education, derived from the behaviorist tradition, acts as a hindrance when applied to the 'real' book approach. Finally, an article by Henrietta Dombey offers readers a practical illustration of how one teacher helps pre-school children relate to the books read at story time. (Contains 12 references.) (KRN)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED359954

LITERATURE AND LITERACY: THE 'REAL' BOOK APPROACH TO CHILDREN LEARNING TO READ

Introduction

There will always be contention about the best way to teach children to read. Broadly, there are two approaches, the traditional approach with its roots in behaviourism and what is known as the 'real' book approach. At present, the official line would seem to favour a traditional approach. Many schools and teachers agree with this choosing to cling to what they regard as a safety net, the reading scheme. Commercially produced schemes have changed in recent years. Many provide what they call extended reading. That is, they include story books with the elemental material. The problem is that some teachers, exhausted with the struggle to get children through the basal stages, regard the additional material as optional. Thus the teaching of reading goes on without much reference to 'real' books. It can be foreseen that this situation will continue and perhaps increase as the demands that schools test - however informally - at seven years is now a legal requirement in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The alternative approach, using 'real' books, has had a bad press especially in the months leading up to the General Election (April, 1992) when education was a political issue. The Minister of Education at the time, Kenneth Clarke, referred to the 'real' book approach as 'curious' and 'trendy' (ref. Daily Mail, January 10, 1991). It was blamed for the perceived fall in reading standards. This prompted the question: what information do teachers have access to with regard to the 'real' book approach? Is it possible that some educators are dismissive of the approach because they believe that it requires only that children have access to a wide range of books? What more does it involve? Is it worth the inevitable revolution in organisation, attitude and teaching style? Such issues are visited in what follows as the development of the 'real' book approach is traced from the late 1960s when Kenneth Goodman's work became available in Britain. With his one-time colleague, Frank Smith, he introduced

IR051009

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Beatrice Mortley

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

the term 'psycholinguistics' to the reading curriculum. The idea was developed in Britain notably by Margaret Meek at the London Institute of Education and by Liz Waterland a primary school teacher in an English school who wrote about it from her own experience of practising it. An article by Colin Mills is included for the way it points out how the common language of education derived from the behaviourist tradition, acts as a hindrance when applied to the 'real' book approach. Finally, an article by Henrietta Dombey offers readers a practical demonstration or exemplar of how one teacher helps very young children to relate to books. In this nursery class, enjoyment is important but it is a by-product of the prime reason for story time, to initiate the children as 'true' readers.

Psycholinguistics and Reading

Smith and Goodman[1] take care to stress that psycholinguistics is not a method of teaching reading. It is the study of language as it relates to the development of thinking. As a way of looking at what a reader does when engaged in reading, it casts light on the process.

Linguistic analysis posits that language has two levels; a surface structure and a deep structure. The surface structure is the sounds or written representation of language while the deep structure relates to meaning. For psycholinguists, it is the deep structure that is important in reading to the extent that: 'The deep level process of identifying meaning either precedes or makes unnecessary the process of identifying individual words', (ref.p180). Thus traditional approaches which depend on decoding are despatched.

Psycholinguists place emphasis on learning rather than teaching. They compare the way children learn to read with the way they learn to speak. Acquiring speech is a natural process for the normal child. The environment conducive to encouraging the

development of reading is spelt out: 'The child learning to read, like the child learning to speak, seems to need the opportunity to examine a large sample of language, to generate hypotheses about the regularities underlying it and to test and modify these hypotheses on the basis of feedback that is appropriate to the unspoken rules that he happens to be testing', (ref. p180).

Agreeing with Chomsky's notion of a language acquisition device, Smith and Goodman state: 'The child is already programmed to learn to read. He needs written language that is both interesting and comprehensible, and teachers who understand language-learning and who appreciate his competence as a language learner', (ref. p180).

Smith's and Goodman's legacy to practitioners may be summed up in two points: the appropriate text for a young reader is a story and children acquire rules which they try out on stories. This should be acknowledged as their method of tackling a story which leads to modification and refinement as they get more practice.

How Texts Teach What Readers Learn: Margaret Meek.[2]

Goodman's and Smith's assumptions receive support from Meek's article. This is a precis of research[3] carried out with a group of teachers who studied individual children with reading difficulties. Meek amplifies the title of the article by reference to children's books, mainly picture books.

Borrowing from Culler[4] Meek articulates 'literary competences' that are acquired from reading 'good' books. She begins with items that might be considered mundane. Taking 'Rosie's Walk' (Hutchins P (1968), Bodley Head) she demonstrates how a five year old at risk as a reader related to it. Unlike accustomed

readers, the child explored every page of the book beginning with the outside cover. In this way, he found out about authorship, publishing, audience, illustrations and their purpose. Meek draws the readers' attention to how the content of this simple reading lesson is often over-looked because it is taken for granted that everybody knows these things. Adults tend to forget that they are new to the novice reader.

Drawing on John Burningham's picture books, Meek exemplifies the 'reading secrets' that such stories hold. In 'Mr Gumpy's Outing' (Burningham J, 1970, Cape) first a couple of children followed by different animals ask to join Mr Gumpy for a boat ride. In each case, he assents but attaches double meaning conditions individual to each request. For example,

> 'May I come, please?' said the pig.
>
> 'Very well, but don't muck about'.
>
> 'Can we come too?' said the chickens.
>
> 'Yes, but don't flap', said Mr Gumpy.

Meek elucidates the reading lessons contained in such texts. 'The reading lessons, about how dialogue appears on the page, the formal ways of making requests, the way the sentences appear on a page, go hand in hand with what children have already begun to discover about language as 'a rich and adaptable instrument for the realisation of intentions' (Halliday 1969)[1] (ref. p16). Taking another text of Burninghams, 'Come Away from the Water, Shirley' (Burningham J, 1977, Cape), Meek shows how children learn the conventions of writing. In this case, young readers work out that the two stories, one seemingly real, the other seemingly fantastic, being presented side by side are both 'true'. To value the story, the reader has to realise this. In other words, he has to be aware of the game the author is playing.

Meek describes a page in a quality picutre book as 'an icon explicated by the viewer. It holds the story until there is a telling' (ref. p12). Children return to stories repeatedly gaining more from them with successive readings. For this reason, it is important for adults to refrain from telling children all that is in a story. Children uncover the layers of a story for themsleves as they become more sophisticated readers with more experience to bring to the text. As a general rule, children revisit stories more than competent adult readers who are less careful and less appreciative readers. Children learn that reading is about extending beyond the words and illustrations. They allow themselves to be carried from the familiar to the novel. They are introduced to metaphor to make new meanings. The example given is taken from 'Granpa' (Burningham J, 1984, Cape) where metaphor is conveyed by the illustrations. The passage of time is suggested by the depiction of the changing seasons. Thus child readers learn to seek meanings beyond the words. Allied to this is what Meek terms 'intertextuality', which occurs when reference is made in a story to other stories as in 'The Jolly Postman and Other People's Letters' (Ahlberg J and A, 1986, Heinemann). When children recognise and savour this device which is 'a very serious business, part of the whole intricate network of words which mean more than they say' (ref. p95), they have entered the fraternity or network of readers. Meek likens the bond this creates between author/illustrator and reader to a conspiracy. The progress of children who learn to read with 'real' books is difficult to measure but indications of reading development are when children move from 'more of the same' to 'I might try something different' and when they show growing tolerance of ambiguity.

Meek sums up her thesis: 'Real books are good reading texts for learners because they introduce children to the discourse styles of various genres' (ref. p39). She continues that experimental authors are constantly changing the genres and children,

too, have an influence by making different demands. She refers to the work of Harold Rosen [6] to make the further but related point that children who are used to 'real' books can take the language of text books in their stride. They realize that curriculum texts vary. In the words of Rosen, 'Topic discourse covers its narrative tracks' and this, Meek pronounces, is 'another text-taught lesson', (ref. p39).

This is all convincingly wholesome but it is easy to see why some people in the education field find it hard to accept and practice. The traditional teacher cannot endorse a system where the texts teach the children and how they are learning the reading competences is unknown except to say that the child readers give themselves lessons. Stated in such terms, Meek's thesis suggests there is no need for a teacher save to provide a range of books. Quite naturally, this type of message upsets teachers. However, a pamphlet published by a teacher who had practised the 'real' book approach for ten years allayed any fears that teachers were redundant. Liz Waterland published 'Read with Me! An apprenticeship approach to Reading'[7] in 1985.

Read with Me: An Apprenticeship Approach to Reading: Liz Waterland

Waterland begins by recalling why she moved to a 'real' book approach. It was the result of several realizations. One, she recognised that she was operating in an behaviourist tradition that views reading as a hierarchy of specific skills to be taught sequentially in small units. Secondly, she was perplexed by her failure to imbue her pupils with a love of books and reading. Like every teacher, she had a percentage of pupils who experienced difficulty with reading. This bothered her but her greatest chagrin was the large number of her pupils who proved to be 'reluctant readers' (Aidan Chambers)[8]; they could read but did not choose to. Thirdly, she pondered why this should be so as she had diligently kept abreast of developments in the

teaching of reading and was an acknowledged authority being involved in refresher courses for teachers.

It was only when she began reading Goodman's and Smith's work on psycholinguistics that she saw her possible mistake. After much thought, she decided the only way for her was to change to a 'real' book approach. She began in a small way with the full support of her head-master by introducing the new way with a reception class. What evolved became known as the apprenticeship approach to reading. She describes it:

> I came to adopt a view of the learner not as passive and dependent like the cuckoo chick but rather as an active and already partly competent sharer in the task of learning to read. Here the model is apprenticeship to a craftsman. (What is, in engineering circles, called 'sitting with Nelly.') Consider the way apprenticeship works: the learner first undertakes the simplest parts of the job, then gradually more complex ones, increasing the share he can cope with and all the time working alongside, under the control of and with the help of the craftsman. The apprentice does not sit passively with his mouth open; he works actively with the tools of his trade in his hand. (Ref. p 8).

The pamphlet outlines her experience from the time she initiated this new approach. It is clearly constructed and includes five key points extrapolated from the theory of psycholinguistics. These are discussed at a practical level in relation to the classroom teacher. They are: in many ways the acquisition of written language is comparable with that of spoken language; reading cannot be taught in a formal, sequenced way any more than speech can; reading is not a series of small skills fluently used; it is a process of getting meaning; the text offered to the child is crucially important; the role of the adult is to be a guiding friend. This is summed up in the quote: 'Instead of assuming that children can only read what they have been taught, we must assume that they can only read what they understand and can interact with, and that the teaching of words has little influence on this process', (ref. p12).

Waterland is realistic and forthright which is probably what endeared her to other

teachers. Having read the theory, she reacts: 'Nor were the writers I had studied very helpful in the actual translation of theory into classroom practice', (ref. p20). Reading the practicalities of her translation of theory into practice over a ten year period leaves no room to underestimate the effort it requires. Waterland presents the material under three headings: the role of the parent, the role of the teacher and resourcing. Each is a minefield involving diplomacy, dedication and money respectively. It is obvious she sets out to be helpful to the teacher who wants to follow in her footsteps. Thus she confronts contentious issues such as recording progress, the place of phonics and the suitability of 'real' books with children with special needs. In each case, she gives examples, sometimes in the form of diagrams, of what she has worked out. Waterland did not minimise the enormity of the change from individual teacher control to partnership with pupils, colleagues and parents. Yet, as sales of her study proclaim, it appealed to teachers who were encouraged to consider the place of real books in the process of learning.

But this is not the end of the story. Putting together Meek's scholarly wisdom and Waterland's practicality proved not to be the royal road to success. An article by Colin Mills[9] records the problems encountered by one teacher who sought to plough this furrow.

Making Sense of Reading: Key Words or Grandma Swagg: Colin Mills

Mills carried out research in a school where a class teacher was changing from a reading scheme to a 'real' books approach to teaching reading. In essence, he discovered that the vocabulary being used by teacher and parents to describe the new approach was 'school' language and in this there lay a danger. The example is given of a parent who, while acknowledging his son's interest in reading worries that he does not seem to be able to recognise the 'key' words. As Mill's says, this expression has its origins in a commercially produced scheme published decades ago.

Perhaps there are grounds to excuse the parent's ignorance but Mills finds that the teacher is also bound by behaviourist vocabulary that he speculates she learnt when taking her teacher education course. An example of this is a quote from her diary: 'I need to work harder at knowing the stages they are at, but I think this approach, this method, is just as structured' (ref. p29).

Mills' article reveals the inappropriateness of this vocabulary derived from a view of reading as decoding to describe a view of reading as a social process. The mismatch is captured in the title of the article which refers to two incidents related in the text. One has already been described (the father using the term 'key words'). The other refers to a situation where a child is discussing a book where Grandma Swagg features as a character. Mills uses this to illustrate the 'real' book approach:

> When children read their first independent texts, they not only bring linguistic resources, they bring social and cultural understandings. They bring understandings of other texts, codes of interpretation learned from their 'reading' of popular culture. They bring the 'stances' of wonder, interpretation and evaluation that they have learned from their teachers and from other co-readers (Isn't that funny? I wonder what?). They use also those shared processes of sense making which they have learned socially. (Ref. p49).

Mills aptly sums it up a couple of pages later: 'An interpersonal process becomes an intrapersonal one', (ref. p50). Mills points to the work of Foucault (1972)(9) which speaks of the 'determining power of discourses'. Emanating from Vygotsky's (1979, p126)[9] view of higher mental functions as 'socially formed and culturally transmitted', this approach allies itself with tracing ways in which literacy is 'socially constructed' in classrooms. To employ a vocabulary at odds with an interpretative, social process in any discourse about reading only serves to constrain thought and hinder the formation of metaphor and concept. The way forward is contained in Mills' concluding sentence 'Our way of looking at [reading] and talking about it needs to change to take into account new readers, new texts and the contents in which they will all interact with one another', (ref. p50).

The next article by Henrietta Dombey, set in the classroom, demonstrates how to introduce young children into the fellowship of readers.

Partners in the Telling: Henrietta Dombey(10)

Storytime is an unshakeable tradition in all infant and nursery school classes. Dombey's article, however, describes story telling with an important difference. The story telling session which is described is preceded by a routine typical of many nursery classes. Activities stop and materials are tidied giving an air of finality. Something different is about to take place. In Mrs G's case, she takes her accustomed chair at the carpeted area and waits until all are seated. The adults are instructed that during this time Mrs G is not to be interrupted and perhaps her devoting her total attention to it is not lost on her young pupils who are expected to follow her example. Mrs G begins every story time by inviting the children to join her in finding out what happens and this is the criterion she uses to judge whether their contributions are acceptable.

Having set the scene, Dombey provides a one page transcript of an extract from a story session taken by Mrs G. At first glance, it seems chaotic but, guided by Dombey, the reader sees what Mrs G is aiming for and how she sets about achieving it. On the two occasions on the transcript when she responds to a child's contribution, these are relevant to the telling of the story. The first is a tentative prediction which was, in fact, accurate while the second is a worthy interpretation of the 'moral' of the story. Mrs G's acknowledgement of these is neither effusive nor artificial. On the first occasion, her response to the prediction is: 'Let's find out and see'. This reply teaches the children that 'what happens next' is discovered by reading further. Thus Mrs G conveys to the children what people do when reading. On the second occasion, Mrs G acknowledges by repeating what the child said. It happens that his utterance was in non-standard English, "He never died", yet Mrs G repeats it

verbatim. Mrs G is tolerant of things like this that many teachers would censure and curb. For example, there are no rules inhibiting interruptions and story time is not used to inculcate social attributes such a turn taking and listening to each other or keeping quiet when teacher speaks. Mrs G is self effacing rather than dominant inviting the children to take control and giving anyone who wishes a say; Mrs G prefers to create 'order in children's minds rather than a more easily observable order in behaviour', (ref. p79).

Mrs G's class are drawn from a deprived council estate where there are few book reading adults. The children had been attending Nursery School for seven months at the time the story session was taped by Dombey. She reports that the twenty children present all seemed to listen and four interrupted frequently. Mrs G's success with the children is reflected in the sketch Dombey draws of one of them

> He remembers the stories he hears, not merely as a sequence of events, but as the interplay of the emotions and intentions of the characters. Sometimes he shows that he can reconstruct some of the language of the telling. As he turns the pages of a book, his eyes and his fingers reveal that although he is still very hazy on the letters of the alphabet, he has learnt many of the conventions of print. In short, Shaun has learnt some very important lessons about reading. (Ref. p70).

Dombey highlights Mrs G's way by contrasting it with the 'straight' more traditional and more common approach to story time of her assistant. It is interesting to speculate why the assistant who listens to Mrs G every day does not take pattern from her. Perhaps the difference in approach is accounted for by 'Mrs G's enthusiasm for and interest in both children's books and children learning to read', (ref. p71).

Teachers who are attracted by the real book approach to reading gain greatly from an article such as Dombey's which offers them a glimpse of how to involve a class as 'partners in the telling'.

Conclusion

The articles that have been discussed outline what is involved for teachers who adopt a 'real' book approach to reading. To begin, they need to understand its underpinnings in psycholinguistics. This means reading the work of theorists like Goodman and Smith which is necessary also to appreciate crucial arguments like those in Mills' article about the importance of appropriate vocabulary. The antecedents of this lie in the work of Vygotsky and in writers who have developed his work. Teachers do not expect to have to read deeply and continuously in this way if they are not studying for advanced qualifications. Yet Waterland's pamphlet testifies to the need for this. She states: "Classroom practice should always have a firm and respectable intellectual basis." Meek's article acts as a warning to teachers not to underestimate quality children's books. They are literature in their own right and should be respected as such. Her article is scattered through with literary criticism of selected children's books as she demonstrates how familiarity with such books makes children into readers. Dombey's article, while not in the same scholarly league, preaches a similar text. This short review of selected literature has produced two points worth noting. First, it highlights the merits of the 'real' book approach and secondly, it scotches any ideas that it is a soft option.

Beatrice Wortley

REFERENCES

1 Smith F and Goodman K, On the Psycholinguistic Method of Teaching Reading in Smith F (ed) 1972, Psycholinguistics and Reading. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

2 Meek M (1988), How Texts Teach What Readers Learn. The Thimble Press.

3 Meek M et al (1983), Achieving Literacy. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

4 Culler J (1977), Structuralist Poetics. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

5 Halliday M A K (1969), Relevant Models of Language in Educational Review, Vol 22, No 7, pp26-34.

6 Rosen H (1984), Stories and Meanings. NATE Publications.

7 Waterland L (1985), Read With Me: An Apprenticeship Approach to Reading. Thimble Press.

8 Chambers A (1969), The Reluctant Reader. Oxford, Pergamon Press.

9 Mills C, Making Sense of Reading: Key Words or Grandma Swagg. In Meek M and Mills C (eds) (1988), Language and Literacy in the Primary School. Falmer Press.

10 Foucault M (1972), The Archaeology of Knowledge. Tavistock.

11 Vygotsky L S (1978), Mind in Society. The Development of Higher Psychological Processes Cambridge MA. Harvard University Press.

12 Dombey H, Partners in the Telling in Meek M and Mills C (eds) (1988), Language and Literacy in the Primary School. Falmer Press.